Too Shy
JR
Inaya Fahad

TOO SHY

INAYA FAHAD

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PREFACE

I wrote this book for kids who need a little courage. Being shy is okay sometimes, but when it happens all the time, it can be a little tricky to tackle the world.

Jessica is a girl just like you! She thinks she can hide and stay shy forever, but she doesn't realize that she's not the little girl she used to be anymore—she's 11! Will she be able to break her habit of being shy and become a brave, vocal girl that no one ever expected?

I hope this book helps you feel brave, even when your voice feels small.

CHAPTER 1

Crash!

The thunder boomed loudly, waking me up.

“Okay, it’s okay, it’s only thunder,” I tell myself, relaxing my shoulders and straightening my back.

My short, brown, curly hair disturbs and tickles me at my neck. My pet cat loves to cuddle up beside me during the nighttime. The only time she doesn't like to cuddle up beside me is when she gets extremely upset, which rarely happens.

I’m the eldest daughter in my family, but the most shy one. My sisters can easily make friends wherever they go, but so far, I don’t have any friends yet.

Oh no!

I almost forgot! Next week is going to be our parent-teacher meeting, and again, I’m going to be getting the same complaints that I get every single year: *I am way too shy*. The thing is I don’t know how to not be shy. Snowflake, my kitten, snores softly. I touch her smooth, soft, fur. Whenever I pet Snowflake, I feel less stressed or frightened or frustrated or—well, you get the point.

I don'[t feel like going back to sleep, so I check my phone to see if I got any messages from my sisters or from my dad or any of my other relatives, like cousins, uncles, and aunts. I don’t have any friends, so I can’t really message anyone else. There are no new messages, so I try to go back to sleep.

The night passes by pretty quickly, and I am the first person to get ready. The second one is my dad. My dad always wakes up at 8:00 am sharp, because he goes to work at the farm. He has told me that it's nice and peaceful with the birds chirping and the strong breeze blowing his long black hair, and that today I should come along with him.

I shrug and say, “I don’t really know about that suggestion, dad.”

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun!”

I know that my dad seems pretty convincing, but I still reply, “Not a chance.”

My dad frowns as he says something that can't make me argue with him any further. “Well, the thing is, when I go to your school and meet your teacher, are you sure your teacher will tell me that you have grown more confident and started speaking?”

For a moment, I sit there silently, with no more words left to say, then at once get up and brush my hair for the fifth time, making sure there wasn’t even a speck of dust on my pink sweater which said, “Girls Rock”, and straighten my matching pink pants which have hearts all over it, and finally say, “Let’s go.”

I dash out the front gate, wearing my brand new bright yellowish-orangish shoes. I tie the long white laces as tight as I possibly can, and right as I am about to start walking on the sidewalk, I feel like I am missing something. I am absolutely correct.

I forget to wear my blue headband with green pearls all over it.

My dad runs his hands through his straight, long hair, waiting for me to get out of the house and rewear my shoes. When I finally don’t forget something, another incident happens.

Of course.

My younger sister Bianca wakes up.

“Hey sis, where are you going? Can I come with you? Why is dad with you? And were you guys going to leave without me? And also, I am very mad and confused and disappointed. Dad always takes me with him wherever he goes, so can he take me now, pretty pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease.”My sister has her pleading face on.

I look at my dad. He looks at me, his face all confused.

He replies, “Umm, well you see, Bianca, the thing is, I am only taking Jessica because she’s not vocal, and so maybe if she goes outdoors, she can meet different people, and—well, you know what I mean.”

Bianca’s pleading face turns into a huge frown.

“I’m sorry, Bianca, but maybe you can, you know, try to sleep again.”

Dad tries to comfort her, but I don’t think it works.

“Dad, I want to come with you, and I can’t sleep because Sofia snores too loudly.”

Sofia is Bianca’s twin sister and my younger sister.

Dad says, “Bianca, to be honest, you shouldn’t be insisting on coming along with me. You should ask your sister.”

I give Dad a long, hard stare.

How does he expect me to react to this situation?

As soon as I am about to reply with a big, loud “NOOOOOOO!” my heart explodes when I see my sister Sofia coming down the stairs, yawning.

“What is going on down here? You guys weren’t planning on going somewhere without me, were you? And if so—what, where, why, who, how?”

To me, the “why” part seems unnecessary, because it makes absolutely no sense at all, and “how” is the simplest answer. We are going to walk there.

But I keep silent, and no one else says anything.

Finally, I open my mouth nice and wide and scream, “Sofia and Bianca don’t have permission from me to come, unless Dad wants you to.”

“Well, thanks, Jessica, for screaming so loudly and bursting my eardrums,” Bianca yells.

Sofia gets startled and blurts out words of nonsense.

“BE QUIET, BOTH OF YOU! Sofia, you’re being so irritating, and Bianca’s giving me a headache.”

Dad has gone to use the restroom, and he says that all three of us have to work together and solve the problem between us. But so far, it hasn’t been going well.

We aren’t solving the problem. We are creating one. A huge one.

Let’s just say that Bianca doesn’t react very well to what I say. I’m sure she doesn’t like it.

Bianca replies to my “Bianca’s giving me a headache” with, “Says the person who is the queen of irritating. You’re literally the definition of a headache, Jessica, so you shouldn’t even be talking.”

I think Bianca speaks on behalf of Sofia when she says, “Says the person who is the queen of irritating.”

Sofia’s response, without words, is a bombastic side eye.

I say, “Sofia, don’t give me the bombastic side eye. And Bianca, you are leading this conversation too far, where it shouldn’t get to. No roasting, okay?”

Bianca doesn’t nod in agreement. Instead, she puts her eyebrows down, angry.

Just then, Dad comes back.

“What did you guys decide while I was gone?”

I speak up, my voice loud and clear. I clear my throat for the tenth time, as if I am preparing myself to stand up in front of a ginormous crowd expecting me to give a speech. I mean, I could have upgraded my “speech” by not saying so many ummmms.

“Ummmm, Dad, we ummmm decided, ummmm, that Sofia and Bianca will ummmm go back to sleep. Ummmm yep, that is totally what we decided.”

Bianca tells Dad that we did NOT decide anything and that we are all creating problems and arguing with each other. Dad looks mad. Very mad.

“Seriously, guys. Five minutes I was gone and you did all of this nonsense. I mean, why all the bickering?” He shakes his head. “This is extremely disappointing and concerning on many different levels.”

“Since you guys didn’t decide while I was gone,” Dad starts, “I will decide. And I decide that… Sofia and Bianca will be coming along with us, since they insist.”

Sofia and Bianca’s faces beam with joy.

I am devastated, but I like how Dad pauses with suspense.

Although Bianca is super, super, super, super glad—I could go on with the supers forever—because she is very excited, and so is Sofia, I still see a flash of disappointment cross Bianca’s face.

“What’s the matter, Bianca?” Dad asks. “Do you not want to go?”

I wait for her response, hoping it is, “No, I don’t want to go,” or, “I don’t want to go to the farm anymore,” or even, “Why should I go to the farm? I’m way too tired already, so I’m going back to sleep.”

Just saying. I keep those thoughts to myself.

What Bianca says is so silly.

“Dad, you know when you said that me and Sofia will come—why did you say my name after Sofia? You should have said my name first.”

“Bianca,” I say, “first of all, you were supposed to say Sofia and I, not me and Sofia. That’s not even proper English. And second of all, be thankful you get to come with us.”

Bianca completely ignores me and immediately starts arguing with Sofia about whose name Dad should have said first.

“STOP THE FIGHTING AND THE BICKERING, YOU TWO!!!!!” I yell, like I have in the past. Dad seems impatient now.

“I invited you guys along with me because I wanted you to have fun, not all of this nonsense.”

We all apologize to Dad, and finally, we get to go.

Before we leave, there is still a lot of whining and questions. Sofia asks, “Do we need our water bottles?”

The answer is, “Optional. Depends on you, because we are bringing plastic bottles for each of us.”

To be honest, I forget what Bianca asks. See? Twins really are the same. My twins have one thing in common: they are both equally annoying.

“Let’s hit the road,” Dad says in a sort of singing tone. “You know the saying, right?”

No one answers, because no one feels like answering.

The concrete beneath me feels smooth.

Don’t ask how I feel it.

Okay, okay, fine. I'll tell you.

It is super embarrassing—well, for me at least—because my sisters are giggling after what they do next.

Bianca keeps attacking my shoes until they fall off. Yes—while I am wearing them.

Then Sofia kicks the back of my foot, which hurts, obviously. I lift my foot up, and that is when Sofia takes my sock off and "accidentally" rips it apart where it was already ripped.

Now my sock is unwearable.

So I don't wear one shoe, because there is no way I am wearing a shoe with no sock. I put my shoe back on my other foot—the left one—where Sofia didn't kick me.

At first, Dad scolds Sofia and Bianca, but then he finds it funny. He even laughs a little and tells me I should take it lightly.

I can't.

I am super embarrassed because on the sidewalk across the street, there is a lady with a high, tight ponytail. She is wearing black sweatpants, a red-and-white T-shirt with a maple leaf (obviously the Canadian flag), a navy blue cap, and white NIKE shoes.

NIKE is my favorite shop. I get all my sweaters, hoodies, and shoes from there, and white is my favorite color. The shoes I am wearing to the farm are from NIKE, and the sweater I'm wearing—"Girls Rock"—is also from NIKE. We go shopping there every weekend.

Anyway, back to the point. The lady is walking her dog. A Siberian husky. My favorite dog species—the one I beg my dad for every single day.

After all the mischievous acts my sisters pull, the lady stops jogging. The dog stops too. They both stare at me. Even the dog.

The dog growls, drool dripping from his mouth. Eww. Gross. He barks so loudly I can hear it from across the street. I am frozen in scariness—if that is even a word.

I can tell he is trying to cross the narrow street, but his owner tugs him back onto the sidewalk. The leash isn't even stretchy.

To be honest, I feel kind of excited. Even if he wants to bite or scratch me, I could at least touch his soft fur—well, what I assume is soft fur.

But the excitement fades when his owner pulls him back.

A few moments later, they start jogging again, and Sofia pulls my arm and forces me to move forward. My sisters run up to Dad like the universe is ending, telling him all about their dreams.

Bianca rushes out, "My dream was—"

Sofia overlaps her. "I had such a splendid dream, Dad. It was about—"

Bianca interrupts again, louder than before.

Sofia snaps.

“Hey! It’s my turn!”

“No it’s not, because I started!”

“THAT. DOES. NOT. MATTER!”

They are both yelling in each other’s ears.

“YES IT DOES!”

“You know what, Bianca? I give up, as much as I want to tell my dream,” She takes a deep breath. I can tell she hates doing this. She sighs loudly.

“You can go first and take my turn.”

“First of all, it wasn’t even your turn. Second of all, thank you. And third of all….”

To me, it seems kind of weird that she is taking it so calmly and lightly, because she really, really looks and sounds like she wants to tell her dream. I expect a, “YES!”

Instead, I hear, “I turn down Sofia’s offer.”

Inside, I’m like, *WHAT?!*

Both of my sisters really want the opportunity to share their dreams—not with each other, but with Dad, of course. Now they are saying things like, “You take my turn,” and “You go first,” and stuff like that.

Later, Dad chooses Sofia to go first. Sofia’s dream is the worst. To be honest, Bianca’s isn’t any better.

Sofia says, “Jessica pours soup all over her face. Then Bianca pushes her into a mud puddle in the forest. Then Jessica loses her voice and gets sick. Then she ummm… I forgot.”

I am glad she forgets, because that is terrible enough already, and there are way too many *thens*.

Bianca starts off with, “I get to relax in the pool, go to my friend’s birthday party, drink boba, and my favorite part—”She inhales deeply. “—is when I kick Jessica in the face with my soccer ball!”

Seriously.

None of my sisters have a dream where there isn’t something bad about me.

It is about time.

Voila!

GIRLS
ROCK

CHAPTER 2

We finally arrive at the farm.

“It’s magnificent!” Sofia exclaims.

Bianca has already scattered away to see her most favorite animals—horses. I mean, what is so great about horses? They are just stinky, smelly, dirty, filthy animals. In everything I just describe about horses, I don’t say anything good, because there is nothing good about them.

I am pretty sure I know why Bianca likes horses. She acts exactly like one—actually, even worse than one!

From my point of view, the farm is disgusting, because all the time it smells like manure. There are a lot of different people who work there, and that makes the hair on my arms stand up.

“Hey, what’s his name and how old is he? Because he’s adorable,” Bianca says to a stranger who works there.

The stranger, whose name is Paul, says, “This is Rusty. He’s a few weeks old and he’s my favorite one. He’s your favorite one too, isn’t he?”

Bianca nods.

Paul continues, “Rusty was adorable a couple of days after he was born, and he attracted most of the people who came to visit the farm. He is the most disciplined foal, since the others are more active than him because Rusty is still a baby. We’ve been taking care of Rusty a lot because his mom is sick.”

“Oh no! What happened to her?!” Bianca asks, shocked, worried, and concerned.

“Oh, Rusty’s mom has been ill since the day Rusty was born. We think that after Rusty’s birth, something must have happened to her, which is why she’s ill right now, but we’re not sure, kiddo.”

After Paul says that, he walks away.

Bianca watches him leave until she can no longer see him, then she looks back at Rusty. Rusty licks her hand through the fence.

At this point, I feel bad for him, and I don’t think him licking Bianca’s hand is disgusting or dirty anymore. I don’t even know how Bianca dares to ask the man all those questions, because I know I wouldn’t have.

I stand idle, just moving my head around, watching other people look at animals. Whenever Dad looks at me, I turn around and fake-laugh as if I am having fun.

I guess I just don't belong at the farm.

Bianca, Sofia, and Dad really enjoy it. I start wondering—if Mom were here right now, what would she do?

I last see Mom when I am in grade one, and now I am in grade six. It has been five years since I've seen her, talked to her, played with her, or done anything with her. She hasn't picked up my calls or answered my texts for the past five years, which is why I stop calling and texting her. I don't know what is going on with her, and I think I should give her some space.

I feel water forming in my eyes. I try to stop it from coming out, and I succeed.

Sofia and Bianca suddenly spring up from where they are crouching to see the animals. They sprint faster than they ever have before, and it makes me wonder why.

I dash after them and soon realize where they are heading.

They run straight to where the rabbits are, just to see their best friend.

"Hi, Emily!" Bianca erupts.

"Emily! It's good to see you here at the farm! Our dad works here," Sofia beams, thrilled and laughing.

"Hello, you guys! It's pretty funny, because my mom works here as well!"

"No way!" Sofia and Bianca exclaim at the same time.

Sofia introduces me with a whole paragraph, and then Bianca piles on even more information. Wow. I never realize how special I am or how much there is to describe about me.

Of course, the first thing they say is my name.

Emily says, "Hi, nice to meet you, Jessica. You are so lucky to have such great sisters. I don't have a single sibling. Sometimes I wish I did, sometimes I wish I don't, because then I get all the ice cream to myself and don't have to share anything—except with my parents, that is. But my parents would be nicer than my siblings would, wouldn't they?"

Bianca and Sofia both nod. To be honest, I don't really care that much.

In my head, my reaction to *You are so lucky* is: *Lucky?! HOW could I possibly be lucky!* These are probably the worst sisters ever, and they are not great at all. Not to mention, they are the only two sisters I have.

But when I respond to Emily, I just give a small smile.

Right then and there, I realize something I never notice before. I don't talk to strangers much, and I get really weird around them. My body feels something I can't describe, and I start walking strangely in front of them.

Luckily, Dad saves me.

“Come on, girls. Time to go home now.”

Sofia wants to stay longer. Bianca does too. I don’t.

Besides, I have a great excuse. I don’t have one of my shoes on. I am carrying it in my hand, which is already embarrassing enough.

GIRLS
ROCK

CHAPTER 3

Dad says that we have to get going because he needs to clean the dishes and make lunch since it is almost twelve. I know to some of you guys that might seem early, but that is our usual lunchtime.

Bianca and Sofia hug Emily and wave goodbye, saying goodbye about a trillion times.

Is that what it is like to have a true friend?

Anyway, we hurry home.

I am glad to be back indoors. I take a quick shower because I am stinky and smell like a farm. I change into my new PJs that we get from the mall. I know Dad will call us for lunch soon, so I go downstairs and sit at the dining table already.

Bianca is watching television, and Sofia is playing on her tablet.

You guys must be thinking, *Why do my sisters do so much screen time?* And you are absolutely correct. Whenever they get an opportunity, they do screen time.

"Oh my gosh, no, no, no! Not that way—the other way!" Sofia shouts at the tablet as if it can listen. She tilts the tablet to the right, then the left.

Bianca is saying things like, "Ugh, no!"

"Save the prince!"

"Don't let the dragon invade the town!"

Me? I just sit there, staring at them.

"Okay, lunchtime, children!" Dad calls everyone over to the dining table for lunch.

"Looks like someone is already here."

He looks at me when he says that, because I am already sitting at the table.

"Bianca, Sofia, you know the rule. No electronics at the dining table," I say in a loud voice so Dad can hear.

"What your sister said—meaning tablet away and television off," Dad adds.

Sofia groans. "Jessica, you're so annoying."

“For real,” Bianca moans.

“No, no,” Dad says. “Jessica said the right thing. But anyway, I would have seen you and told you to turn everything off.”

For once, I am glad I can take credit for something.

Today’s lunch is a peanut butter and salmon sandwich. Dad says that for dinner we are going to have shrimp, and after dinner, seaweed and sushi.

Yum!

Seaweed and sushi are my favorite things to eat. I like how during lunchtime, Dad already plans the next meal of the day. I take a huge first bite of my sandwich.

“Jeez, Jessica, chill,” Bianca says in disgust, seeing my entire mouth covered in white sauce.

“Well, I get nasty when I eat, Bianca,” I say with my mouth full, already ready to take another bite.

“Mmmmmm, yummy!” Sofia says.

“Blech,” Bianca says as she watches Sofia chew with her mouth open.

“Am I the only one in this house who has respect and manners?”

Dad raises his hand. “I have manners.”

“I know, Dad. I’m talking about the children in this house,” Bianca says.

While Bianca is talking, I have already finished my lunch and am about to put my plate in the sink when Dad says, “Hey, would you mind putting mine away too?”

“No, Dad, I don’t mind,” I say.

I put both of our dishes away.

“Mine too,” Sofia says.

“I would mind, Sofia,” I reply. “Stop being so lazy and put your dish away yourself.”

Bianca is the only one who hasn’t put her dish away and has already started watching television again.

I stand in front of Bianca and block her view, which makes her pause the TV.

“Move out of the way. You’re blocking the view,” Bianca says.

“This is the most exciting part, where the dragon is chasing the prince, and I want to see it.”

She looks grumpy, but I don’t budge.

“Haven’t you watched this a bunch of times already?” I say. “You already know what’s going to happen.”

“Yeah, but I want to see it again. I’m only watching it for the fifth time,” Bianca says.

I want to see how long it will take Bianca to realize she hasn't put her dish away.

Two minutes pass.

All she does is try to look around me at the screen, with no clue why I am standing there and not minding my own business. She tries pushing me away, standing up, sitting somewhere else, and leaning around me—but nothing works.

Then I give up. Yep. I just quit.

I look at Bianca's plate and point at it.

Immediately, she stands up. As soon as she picks it up, she says, "Jessica, you could've just told me before and I would've done it. What took you so long?"

"I wanted to see how long it would take you to realize," I reply, "but you just didn't care."

After Bianca carefully puts her dish in the sink, I say, "Remember when you talked to me and Sofia about respect and manners? Well, who lacked that right now, huh?"

I giggle a little after I say it.

"It's not funny," Bianca replies.

"Oh yeah?" I say. "How about when I didn't think it was funny when you and Sofia ripped and ruined my sock?"

Ooh, this is fun.

There are so many things I can get her back for.

A few moments later, there is awkward silence. That is when I leave the living room. I walk down the hall and go upstairs, straight into my room.

JR

CHAPTER 4

As soon as I enter my room, the silence ends. Of course it does.

Bianca turns the volume up to sixty, and Sofia starts yelling at her tablet. When I want silence the most, it disappears.

Of course.

I find an old white box with blue lines covering it under my bed, pushed into the very corner. I am cleaning up when it suddenly pops out of nowhere. I have no idea what it is, so I stuff it back under my bed carelessly.

Yep. I just dump it. It has been laying there for a couple of weeks.

I decide to inspect it and see what is inside. It wouldn't be in my room and under my bed for no reason. It must be mine.

The box is old, with cobwebs all over and across it, and now it is officially bent. It smells stinky, probably because it stays under my bed for a while.

On the back of the box, there is a name written in red pen.

Isla Bennett.

That is definitely Mom's handwriting.

I remember Dad showing me a video of Mom handing me a white box with blue lines covering it. That was when I was three years old. Back then, the box is brand new.

How do I never notice it before?

When I open the box, the thing inside isn't destroyed at all. It is still sparkly, shiny, and brand new.

It is a choker with my initials on it.

A purple choker that says "JR," because those are my initials.

I wear it. I have to. It is a gift from Mom.

Snowflake wakes up from her first nap of the day. She stretches just as I yell, "Look, Snowflake! Notice anything different about me?"

Snowflake meows and starts playing with my choker.

“There, there, Snowflake. That is enough,” I say. “We don’t want it to break now. Well, at least I don’t want it to break.”

I know this isn’t the best idea, but I decide to text Mom—whether she replies or not. I feel kind of nervous, to be honest.

I cuddle Snowflake. I take a deep breath, and my fingers slowly move as I click letter by letter.

THANK YOU FOR THE CHOKER

I slowly click send.

Right after that, I gasp.

“Snowflake! Mom texted me when I went to the farm!”

Mom’s message says, I have a surprise for you.

I am so curious. My mind starts racing.

Is the surprise the choker?

Does Dad know about it?

Have they secretly been planning something?

Or is it a surprise for Dad himself?

Do my sisters know anything about it?

Probably not.

I go downstairs to ask Dad about Mom’s surprise.

He says he has no idea what I am talking about, and that he and Mom haven’t even made any contact since—

He stops talking.

When I ask him again, he tells me he doesn’t want to talk about it anymore. Dad is out of the question. I am sure he doesn’t have the answer.

I don’t want to ask my sisters, because I know they won’t have the answer either. If Dad doesn’t know, then my sisters definitely don’t.

I try to get my mind off it by doing other things, but no matter what I do, I just can’t stop thinking about it.

Wait.

Would I seem impolite to Mom if she reads my text thanking her for the choker?

I think it might, because she gives me the choker when I am three. If I text her now, it might seem like I never wore it before.

Oh no.

I think I message Mom about the choker too late.

I want to know when the surprise will happen. Today? Tomorrow? The day after? This evening?

I guess I may never know—for now.

Anyway, I should probably get ready for school. I hope my teacher, Ms. Rosa, doesn't give too much work. I already have enough work at home.

I pick out my clothes for tomorrow: pink shorts and a half-sleeve shirt.

I want to sleep early before the long day at school. I have to wake up at eight in the morning because my bus arrives at nine. I cuddle Snowflake and lie down on my pillow.

JR

CHAPTER 5

I must be really tired, because after I lie down on my pillow, I can't remember anything after that.

I forget to set my alarm to wake up at eight in the morning, because I don't usually wake up at eight. Dad wakes me up instead, since I don't wake up by myself.

I am still in the middle of my dream when I hear Dad calling my name. He shakes my entire body and pulls the blanket off me.

I groan really loudly, but force myself to get off my comfy, baby-blue bed. I grumpily stomp off the bed and drag myself into the bathroom.

Sadly, I take off my purple PJs and put on my shirt and pink shorts. I get ready for school, stuff an apple into my mouth, and leave the house.

My school bus arrives a little late because of delays, so I just stand there, waiting. My green backpack keeps slipping off my shoulder, so I hold it in my hand instead. I don't trust the floors of the school bus, so I usually keep my bag hanging on my shoulder.

When I arrive at school, I already know I am going to have an unpleasant morning.

I see Penny entering the same classroom as me, which means we have the same class.

Penny and I have had beef since the day we met, and I honestly don't know why. She just doesn't like me for some reason.

"Hey, Jessica," Penny says.

I am actually kind of glad she uses my real name for once. She usually calls me a sucker, loser, or sometimes Johnny—which no one talks about, because something happened in second grade. I ignore her and take a seat in the last row, fourth chair. You can sit wherever you want, so I choose the corner.

There are two reasons for that.

First, Penny sits at the very front. Second, I hate it when the teacher stares at me too much. I keep my head down the whole period so the teacher won't call my name.

Just when I hear it.

"Jessica, Laura, and Terresa, you will be partners for this assignment."

Well, at least I am not with Penny. But I still hate group assignments, especially ones where you have to talk and collaborate.

The topic is writing an essay about some random dude from the 1800s.

“Let’s do some research on him,” Terresa says.

“I already know a lot about Charlie Chaplin. He’s, like, a role model for me. I mean, he makes a lot of good stuff,” Laura replies.

In my lowest voice, I ask, “Who’s Charlie Chaplin?”

Terresa and Laura look shocked, as if I speak so loudly that I make cliffs fall.

“YOU don’t know who Charlie Chaplin is?!” Terresa beams.

Laura says calmly, “It’s okay if she doesn’t know who he is. I didn’t know until I was nine. Charlie was born on April 16, 1889, and he was an English comic actor. I would tell you more about him, but we should save it for the essay.”

I nod my head in agreement.

The next—and last—hour of school passes with my French teacher talking nonstop about French numbers from zero to one hundred and how we are going to have a test on Tuesday.

I go home, pick up my sisters, and all I hear is them talking about what they did at school. I don’t care, so it feels like they are talking to themselves—unless they are talking to each other. That is a different story, because I am definitely not replying.

My mood is set to dull, which is usually my mood when I am bored.

Dad gets a haircut, and he looks more—how do I say it—bold. It makes me wonder why, because Dad loves his long black hair. Every day, he combs it as if he is doing it for the very last time.

There is a knock, followed by the doorbell ringing.

“Why don’t you get it, Jessica?” Dad says.

I don’t have a problem with that—only with talking.

I swing the door open slightly and take a peek, not realizing who it is for the first few seconds.

It is someone familiar. Just not recognized right away.

JR

CHAPTER 6

"**MOM??!!"** I glance at dad, then at my mom again.

My two sisters run over and jump on her, not even giving her room to breathe. They squeeze her tightly, like they are squeezing a lemon into their soup.

After she settles a little, I pounce on her too.

"Was this the surprise?" I ask gently.

"Yep, it sure was," Mom replies.

Dad knew about it, but he wanted to keep it a surprise.

I stick to Mom for the rest of the day, as if I am glued to her. I drag her to my room and show her everything, and somehow, I feel different. My voice feels stronger than it ever has before.

I play chess, Snakes and Ladders, Uno, eat vanilla ice cream, and do all sorts of things with Mom. Snowflake gently purrs toward her. Mom cuddles Snowflake, and I am glad she likes her.

An hour later, Mom comes and sits beside me on the sofa while I am reading my book.

"Hey, I've got to tell you something."

My face beams with excitement.

"You're going to go to a speech competition," she says. "They're going to judge who gives the best speech on their topic."

Never mind. I never think a day like this will erupt—especially out of nowhere.

I don't like this at all, which is why I tell Mom to take me out of it. She says it is a good opportunity for me to learn how to speak up.

Gulp.

The next day, I don't want to leave school. I would rather stay there than go home and study for—gulp—speeches.

Our assignment is due today, which shocks me.

Luckily, Terresa and Laura finish it and write my name on it too, even though I contribute nothing. They are furious about that.

They march up to me.

“No wonder you have no friends.” That pinches me—not in my shoulder, but in my heart.

I decide I am going to prove to them that I am not weak, and that I will be in the competition Mom signed me up for.

I spend the next few weeks preparing until the day finally comes. I have been having such good weeks lately, and I don’t want to ruin them.

This time, I don’t bomb my French test. I crush it.

Today is the day to prove that I can make friends—and that I am not weak.

JR

CHAPTER 7

“ Jessica, come up to the stage please.” I am not used to this—speakers blasting my name loudly in front of the entire audience.

I remember what Mom told me. I remember how much work I put into this, how many hours I practiced. This is my time to shine.

The topic is to speak about yourself.

That doesn’t feel odd. Bianca and Sofia talk about me all the time to their friends anyway.

I straighten my back and stand tall, facing the crowd. I do this for me, for my parents, for my sisters, for the sake of making friends—and for the people who laughed at me.

I can do this, I repeat in my head.

I take a deep breath and smooth out my long purple dress. This isn’t a dream anymore. This is real.

“Hello everyone. My name is Jessica Rafold. I’m in grade six, and I study at Evergreen Academy. “I’m not famous, and I’m not known across the world. I’ve been shy my entire life. I never thought I was doing anything wrong—but I was.

“When I was younger, it was okay. But as I grew older, I couldn’t make friends. I got bullied. I didn’t have the courage to collaborate with my peers.”

I feel myself warming up.

“It’s been hard to break this habit because I never tried to escape it. I thought being quiet would protect me. But now I understand how important it is to speak up—to stop hiding and thinking I can escape life with no friends.”

I pause.

“I’d like to conclude now. It’s been a pleasure meeting you all. Thank you.”

I want to say more, but my time is up.

A few contestants later, the judges announce the results.

I win.

I hold the trophy proudly in my hands, and for the first time, my voice feels like it reaches beyond just me.

At school, Penny talks to me.

Yes—Penny. She tells me she likes the way I spoke and asks if I want to hang out sometime. We exchange numbers.

Terresa, Laura, and everyone else stick by me for the rest of the day.

So this is what it feels like to not be shy!